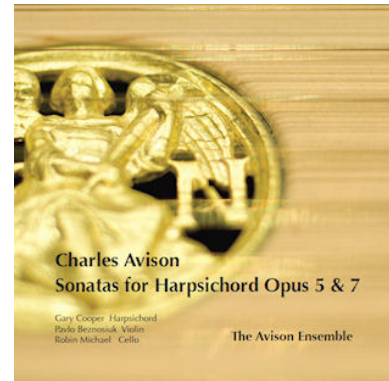


Avison

ENSEMBLE

reviews

CHARLES AVISON SONATAS FOR HARPSICHORD OPUS OP. 5 AND 7



THE AVISON ENSEMBLE
GARY COOPER (HARPSICHORD), PAVLO BEZNOSIUK AND
CAROLINE BALDING (VIOLINS), ROBIN MICHAEL (CELLO)
2 CDs on Divine Arts, dda 21215

- **MusicWeb** recording of the month November 2010
- **Final release in the Avison Ensemble's complete recording of Avison's orchestral and chamber music**

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... performances notable for their wit, elegance
and refinement
... a very welcome and refreshing release

INTERNATIONAL RECORD REVIEW

Marc Rochester

The 12 sonatas on this disc are something of a hybrid between the Trio Sonata and the accompanied Keyboard Sonata. In his excellent notes, Simon Fleming suggests that the model for this type of sonata comes from Rameau, but he adds 'Avison created a new species of sonata that was largely peculiar to the North East'. More than that, we are told that this type of sonata was a 'popular genre in the north east'. I wonder if those who inhabit the north east of England today are aware that, in the eighteenth century, their forebears, were fans of such elevated music; and I can't help wondering what might have now supplanted the harpsichord sonata in the life of present-day Tynesiders.

Enough of idle speculation. The booklet also tells us Charles Avison was a 'little known Newcastle born composer'; something which came as a surprise to me since my childhood seemed to be surrounded by Avison's music. My father, himself

having spent some of his formative years in the north east, possessed several copies of pieces by Avison, which he played with great enthusiasm; it was one of these that he gave me to learn at my first organ lesson with him. Yet when I inspect the record catalogues I realize that, indeed, Charles Avison (1709-70) has rather passed under the radar, overshadowed as much by his southern contemporaries to whom he himself acknowledged a debt of gratitude: Geminiani (with whom he studied in London during his brief period away from Newcastle), Domenico Scarlatti and J. C. Bach. That he has now attracted the devotion of such an outstanding specialist period-instrument ensemble, to the extent that it has taken his name and dedicated itself to the promotion of his music, shows that not only was my father's enthusiasm not ill-founded but that England has done its own musical heritage no favours with its London-centric attitudes.

If people still doubt that the north east could breed a composer to rival the best in London and beyond then they only need to listen to these remarkable disc; remarkable as much for the glories of the music they contain as for the brilliance of the Avison Ensemble's playing and, in particular, Gary Cooper's delightful harpsichord virtuosity. He revels in the ad libitum passage interpolated into Op. 5 No. 3, while he chatters away with such ebullience in the quicker movements that the sense of these sonatas being, as Avison himself suggested, 'a Conversation among friends, where the Few are of one mind, and propose their mutual sentiments, only to give Variety, and enliven the select Company" (Avison was clearly a man with a penchant for commas) is palpable.

It's always tempting to identify influences to describe music which is probably unfamiliar to anyone who is reading this without first having bought the disc, but in truth there is very little here which reminds one of any other composer of the period or earlier. Perhaps, some imaginative soul might feel a bit of Pachelbel peeps over the ledge in Op. 5 No. 4 or a bit of J. S. Bach finds its way into the last movement of Op.5 No. 3, but elsewhere this is pure, unmolested music, wholly original in style, language and idiom, and it's an idiom with which the Avison Ensemble clearly feels totally at ease. These are performances notable for their wit, elegance and refinement, unpretentious and uncluttered by artificial nuance or superimposed gesture. The recording made down south in a Cambridge church, is likewise a model of discretion and understatement. All in all, this is a very welcome and refreshing release which should help introduce Charles Avison to those who didn't have my childhood benefits and have yet to realize that he was a composer of real distinction.

MUSICWEB

Jonathan Woolf

With each new release of Charles Avison's music something is becoming clearer; his standing as a composer is significantly higher than might be supposed. Partly this is historical; he composed when the country's music-making was dominated by Handel, and partly geographical, since he lived in Newcastle. It's true that his

position as a composer was unchallenged in the North-East, but that cut little ice with the Metropolitan elite in London, and the paucity of recordings, until very recently, reflected his 'backwater' status.

Fortunately recordings such as this and others have begun to show just how adaptable, personable, imaginative and clever is his writing. His accompanied keyboard sonatas are in three sets. Op.5 was published in 1756, followed by op.7 in 1760 and op.8 four years later. In this two disc set we hear opp. 5 and 7. Avison was an eloquent admirer of his contemporaries and forebears, taking pains in his advertisement for the op.8 set to cite Scarlatti, Rameau, Geminiani and C.P.E. Bach by name. His opinion of Handel was not unmixed. The genesis for this kind of work was a compound of Corellian procedure and Rameau's 1741 Pièces de Clavecin. The cleverness of Avison lies in his accommodation of both forms, and in his ability successfully to utilise them to his own devices. The sonatas were not intended for public performance, but rather for 'private amusement'. The keyboard part is complete in and of itself (so an amateur could play the part on his own), the string writing acting as a supporting fabric to the harpsichord. There are no solo flourishes from the strings.

The op. 5 set consists of six multi-movement works, some four, some two, and one in three movements. All are compact and full of lively music making. Maybe there are hints of a Scotch Snap in the opening of the First, in G major. What's undeniable is the fecundity of invention, the warm textures of the Minuet, the lightly contoured cello drone in the Allegretto finale and ensuing folkloric inflexions. Not only is Avison's writing broad-minded and full of thematic interest, but the performances by Gary Cooper and his eminent cohorts fully worthy of it; the combination is outstanding in every way. Avison has a real sense of character and sometimes quirkiness. The second movement of the two-movement second sonata is the more unpredictable and original and keeps one on one's aural toes throughout. It's very cleverly composed, very fluid thematically, and passing Handelian moments - or moments that seem Handelian maybe in retrospect - only add to the mélange. The Andante of the Third has the lyric qualities of a John Stanley, whilst the Siciliana of the Fourth flows as sweetly as a fresh stream. The performers all catch the brisk articulation of the following Aria - spiritoso , as marked.

In 1760 the op.7 collection was published. Apart from the fifth, which is in three movements, all the others are written in two. The presto opening of the second has an almost operatic intensity, but also compression. There's decorative melancholy in the opening of the third whilst the opening of the fourth is more explicitly expressive, in a way that begs the question as to whether Avison wrote oratorios? The finale of this sonata is theatrical and fulsome, the Ciacone of the sixth sprightly and life-enhancing.

Recording quality (first class), performances and music come together in a wholly splendid way in this disc, one which advances Avison's cause still further.

FANFARE MAGAZINE

Barry Brenesal

When I started the first cut in this set, it immediately sounded wrong. The Avison Ensemble was applying both extensive French Baroque instrumental ornamentation, and notes inégales, much after the manner of Couperin's observation about French composers: "We write music differently from the way we play it ... the Italians, on the other hand, observe the exact value of the notes in composing their music." But as the selection progressed, it became apparent that Avison was deliberately writing in the French manner, and one that was already old-fashioned at the time of these works' composition, too. After doing some research, I discovered that this change in manner could be dated to the early 1750s, when Avison had presented the public with Rameau's Pièces de Clavecin en concert in his Newcastle concerts. That influence carried across to his own "harpichord sonatas" of op. 5 (1756) and op. 7 (1760), where the accompaniment, as with Rameau, rises to the point of taking an active, equal part in the proceedings. It can't be said that Avison pursued the intricate part-writing of the Frenchman, or possessed his great dramatic gifts (which appeared in chamber music, as well as in cantatas, motets, and operas), but he discovered a melodic-harmonic vein of charm that does, indeed, honor the man whose "science" he so greatly admired in the written advertisement to one of his later collections.

As to the performances by the Avison Ensemble, they are worthy of the music they play, being both suavely urbane and stylistically astute. The numerous figurations they apply are well chosen, and properly more common in slow movements than fast ones. A broad, reasonable range of tempos is selected throughout. Technically, there's nothing to challenge these musicians, although the sound of the recording seems a trifle distant and over-reverberant. It's not a major factor interfering with enjoyment, however. Definitely recommended.

AUDIOPHILE AUDITION

Steven Ritter

Charles Avison (1709-70) was a transitional composer between the Baroque and Classical periods. He was a church organist at St John The Baptist Church in Newcastle and at St. Nicholas's Cathedral. Avison wrote in the established Italian style, and is best known for his 12 Concerto Grossi after Scarlatti, memorably recorded by Neville Marriner and the ASMF on a Philips two-fer.

But he also wrote a number of harpsichord suites, both with the continuo (as we have here) and without. This is amazingly my first exposure to these works and I am thrilled beyond measure; not only are they fully professional, gloriously melodic pieces of great imagination, but they do not shy away from rhythmic complexities and extraordinary flair in their two to four movement forms.

Though the additional instruments are present, Avison in fact made the harpsichord part compete in itself, no doubt with the understanding that the amateur music market would be a lucrative one. But these are not fluff pieces at all—they are superbly crafted melodic gems that ran through their two-hour playing time several times over to great delight on my player.

Avison is a composer who wrote a lot of music, and much needs to be explored, so we can be grateful to The Avison Ensemble (Gary Cooper, harpsichord; Pavlo Beznosiuk and Caroline Balding, violins; Robin Michael, cello) for giving us this set, played with great authority. The sound is clear, very close, and detailed, though the closeness tends to make the two violins sound more like a small chamber orchestra, so I would start out keeping the volume at a lower than normal level. Wonderful stuff!

BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE

George Pratt

Charles Avison spent almost all his life (1709-1770) in Newcastle. His provincial isolation may explain his considerable originality, exemplified in these two sets of six sonatas. He avidly collected Rameau's music, including fully written-out harpsichord pieces with optional flute/violin. Similarly here, unlike conventional trio sonatas, the keyboard parts are musically complete for solo performance, while the string parts enrich textures and vary sonorities.

Inevitably, most interest rests with the keyboard. Avison's Op. 5 No. 2 opens with cascading harpsichord figuration behind the simplest string chords (vividly recalling 'Three Blind Mice'); in the 'Giga' ending Op. 5 no. 6, the harpsichord plays a bounding 6/8 within a halo of sustained string harmony. Within such simple forces, there is considerable invention: Op. 7 No. 2 starts with exceptionally vigorous sequences and positively Vivaldian energy; Op. 5 No. 3 links two movements thematically.

Recording is rather close, giving performers' rather than audience's perspective, but simulates the sense of 'private Amusement' which Avison claimed for these sonatas.

BBC RADIO 3 CD REVIEW

Andrew McGregor

Such a rich sound... affectionate performances... adding to our knowledge and appreciation of one of Northern England's unsung musical heroes.