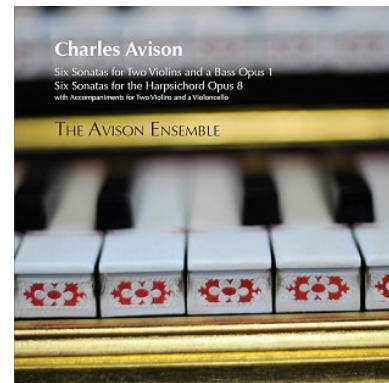


Avison

ENSEMBLE

reviews

CHARLES AVISON OP. 1 TRIO SONATAS AND OP. 8 KEYBOARD SONATAS



THE AVISON ENSEMBLE
ROBERT HOWARTH (HARPSICHORD & CHEST ORGAN),
PAVLO BEZNOSIUK & CAROLINE BALDING (VIOLINS),
RICHARD TUNNICLIFFE (CELLO)
2 CDs on Divine Arts, dda 21214

... outstanding and expressive performances
... a captivating collection of sonatas
... a most desirable release

INTERNATIONAL RECORD REVIEW

George Pratt

Avison's 'Six sonatas for two violins and a bass' Op. 1 are attractive Italianate 'church' sonatas – Avison was a pupil of Geminiani, in turn a pupil of Corelli. They feature Corellian ingenuity – shifting harmony, studiously avoiding cadences. (No. 1); a haunting sequence slipping without a break into an adagio (No.2). The interplay of all three instruments is neatly managed, the cello often a melodic equal to the violins, especially in the French Overture opening No. 3. The playing is committed and, with five sonatas in the minor mode, often impassioned. The recording sound is excellent.

Avison's six Op. 8 sonatas are markedly different, written for a solo keyboard that is musically self-sufficient, but with two ad lib violins and cello. They reflect his admiration, acknowledged in his 'Advertisement' for Rameau and CPE Bach. The sonority suffers from his astringent tone of high violins, avoiding competition with the harpsichord's middle register, while some of the music is frankly uninspired – harmonic minimalism in a March, a banal folk-like melody as the basis for a set of variations, but no less a light diversion now than in 18th-century Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

CLASSIC FM MAGAZINE

Rick Jones

The 300th birthday of the British Baroque composer Charles Avison (1709-70) has been missed by most, and not even the Avison Ensemble's sleeve notes mention it. This double disc is a delight, especially the sonatas for two violins and bass which are full of invention. The harpsichord sonatas are less successful; the unchanging dynamic emphasizes the simplicity of construction. Altogether, the set is an excellent and timely commemoration of a composer whose profile should rise with this issue.

INTERNATIONAL RECORD REVIEW

Piers Burton-Page

The last track of the second disc of this fine double album is Avison's Sonata in G, Op. 8 No. 6. It is well worth waiting for; nothing short of a miniature set of variations, on what sounds like a melancholy quasi-folk-tune, treated with deftness, wit and invention. It's also played here with relish and charm by the four members of the Avison Ensemble. It characterizes so much of what I feel about this release; essentially, that the rediscovery of this composer and his music in recent years has been long overdue, but also that he is something of a one-off, an intellectual not always easy to pin down, because quirky and unpredictable, suggesting widely different influences at different stages of his career. Indeed the two sets of sonatas here might almost – not quite! – be by two different composers.

Charles Avison, whose mature musical activities were largely centred on Newcastle-upon-Tyne, lived from 1709 to 1770, and he never quite faded from view owing to the seminal nature of his 1752 *Essay on Musical Expression*. The Ensemble who have bravely borrowed his name can already proudly point to a number of successful recordings of his music; including the *Concertos*, Opp. 3, 4 and 6 for Naxos, as well as the *Concerti grossi*, Opp. 9 and 10 and Avison's orchestral expansions of instrumental sonatas by Scarlatti and by Avison's own mentor Geminiani, on the present enterprising label. (We are promised, as a final installment, the *Sonatas*, Opp. 5 and 7 later this year.)

The dozen sonatas here were actually recorded over three years ago, with ideal sound, using historically informed practice, on historic instruments or, in the case of the keyboards, excellent-sounding period copies; it has been well worth the wait, for Avison proves as inventive here as elsewhere. More so, perhaps, in Op. 8 than in Op. 1 – some 27 years separate their publication, and since the earlier set dates from 1737, when Avison was in his twenties and still under the spell of Geminiani and Corelli in London, perhaps that should not surprise us. All the same, one can be impressed by the dark-hued sounds that are the predominant feature

of these Trio Sonatas, Op. 1; all but the last are in minor keys (the first is even headed 'in chromatic Dorian mode'), and all are in the standard four-movement slow-fast, slow-fast sonata da chiesa format. Simon Fleming's thoroughly readable note wonders whether they really were actually intended for execution in church, but it is difficult to feel that the alternatives, public entertainment or private music-making, would quite lend themselves to such severity of utterance. The small portative organ used for these pieces by Robert Howarth is ideal for the purpose.

For the later Op. 8 set, which did not appear until 1764, the harpsichord he uses is a Taskin copy, and in them he deploys some remarkable and unflashy virtuosity; some of the keyboard writing is flamboyant, but executed with seeming ease. These pieces were anyway originally advertised as keyboard sonatas with accompaniment for two violins and a bass – although that is not always what one hears, since the violin parts are by no means mere embellishments, as the performers well understand. This time around, all the keys but one are major, sonata da chiesa form gives way to simple pairs of movements (but now longer), and the Italian influence yields to Rameau, sometimes Handel, and very audibly Domenico Scarlatti; the opening movement of the D major is identified as a March, but there are similar four-square dotted rhythms at the start of the B flat (No. 4), and in both cases the repeated notes inevitably recall the Neapolitan master.

There are other surprises; the two movements of No. 2 are linked by a weirdly meandering 'Interludio', whose succeeding Allegro is full of character; quite simply, Avison is never predictable. That little set of variations at the end of Avison's Op. 8 is just the icing on the cake of a most desirable release.

THE CONSORT

Ibrahim Aziz

The Avison Ensemble must be praised for its outstanding work in championing British baroque composers after Purcell, particularly those working in northern England in the mid to the latter part of the 18th century. One of the ensemble's latest CDs features the chamber works of Charles Avison (b. 1709), who lived and worked in Newcastle between 1735 and his death in 1770. The recording contains six sonatas for two violins and bass op. 1 and six sonatas for harpsichord op. 8, with accompaniment for two violins and a cello. The double CD forms an attractive diptych portraying Avison at both ends of his career, highlighting many fine, inventive compositions.

The Six Sonatas op. 1 was the first set of pieces which Avison published during, or shortly after, his period of study with Francesco Geminiani in London in the 1730s. It is not surprising, therefore, that these pieces are strongly influenced by this teacher, and from listening to them one would be forgiven for thinking that Handel might also have played a part in their development, except that Avison, throughout his career, maintained a poor opinion of the German composer. Avison

wrote that Handel, although 'Born with Genius capable of soaring the Heights, to suit the vitiated Taste of the Age ... (he) lived in, descended to the lowest', a statement that must have done the composer few favours in Handel-loving London, and which may have been one of the reasons which caused him to eventually decided to base himself in Newcastle.

The op. 1 trios follow the sonatas da chiesa of Corelli closely in mood and structure, and musically they show Avison's first attempt at independence as a composer, departing from the style of his teachers. There are distinct signs of originality in the melodies, but his reliance on repetition (such as the use of a descending scale motif first heard in the fugal section of sonata no. 1) is typical of a composer who is still experimenting with, and needing to expand, his musical palette. The part-writing, however, is mature, and the violins and cello are skillfully blended so that no keyboard instrument is actually necessary (although the title page omits this fact).

In the sonatas op. 8 we encounter a different Avison: here we see a mature composer and virtuoso keyboard player displaying his prowess, and enjoying it. The harpsichord writing is brilliant, even dazzling at times, and displays an originality of style that is markedly different from the sonatas op. 1. Modelled on Rameau's *Pièces de Clavecin en Concert*, the op.8 sonatas are prototypes of the later classical piano trios of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, in which the role of the string and keyboard is reversed, and attention is drawn more towards the keyboard than to the violins and cello. The spirit of these pieces is a heady combination of the fire and heat of Scarlatti, the grotesque and the bizarre of Rameau, and the charm and grace of the pre-classical salon. I would recommend starting with track 3 of CD no.2, the A minor sonata (not C major as printed in the CD booklet), before listening to anything else.

The CDs feature Pavlo Beznosiuk and Caroline Balding on violins, Richard Tunnicliffe on cello and Robert Howard on organ (op.1) and harpsichord (op.8). The strings create a superb, well-blended sound, and offer a wide range of tonal colours and variety, but Howard deserves special credit for his continuo rendition in op.1, and his exceptionally fine harpsichord playing in op.8. There is much to appreciate – and learn – from his subtle articulation and phrasing, while his bold, decisive, no-nonsense approach on the harpsichord is a relief from a world where delicacy and finesse can sometimes overtake flair and good judgement.

FANFARE

Christopher Brodersen

Charles Avison (1709-1770) belongs to that unfortunate generation of English composers who lived and worked under the shadow of the great Handel. Other of his ilk include William Croft, Maurice Green, John Stanley, William Boyce and Thomas Augustine Arne, all of whom worked primarily in the field of church music (Handel was less active here), with the exception of Arne, who wrote extensively

for the theater. Avison, by comparison, is the sole English-born musician of the period who can claim to have built his reputation on instrumental music and this he accomplished during his own lifetime. Born into a musical family in Newcastle-on-Tyne, Avison spent his entire adult life in that northern seacoast town, except for a brief sojourn in London, during which he is said to have studied with Geminiani. In fact, Avison's Trio Sonatas, Op. 1, were most likely written in London under the guidance of Geminiani. Italian music, of course, was all the rage in England at the time, and as a pupil of the great Corelli, Geminiani no doubt passed the torch to Avison, whose Concerti Grossi, Op. 6, bears all the hallmarks of the Corelli/Geminiani style. These were, and remain Avison's most popular (and recorded) works.

Avison's chamber music also contains elements of the prevailing Italian style, whether in the older trio-sonata format or the newer 'harpsichord with the accompaniment of two violins', and can be considered his greatest accomplishment. Unlike the concerti grossi, which are in many cases arrangements of earlier music by Corelli, Geminiani and Scarlatti, the sonatas are all original compositions, and in the case of the harpsichord sonatas, incorporate a newer, more extroverted, less 'hide-bound' compositional style that points to concurrent developments in France and Germany, variously known as style gallant and empfindsamer Stil. The harpsichord sonatas, with their constantly scurrying 16th notes, put quite a demand on the keyboard player. They sound for all intents and purposes like 'chamber concertos'. I find it ironic that Avison write this music for the old-fashioned harpsichord, rather than the up-and-coming pianoforte. But the music would certainly lose much of its effervescent charm if it were played on the latter.

The Avison Ensemble was formed 'several years ago' by the cellist Gordon Dixon with the express purpose – you guessed it – of performing recently discovered works of Avison. With all the concerti grossi now released on the Divine Art label, the group has turned its attention to the chamber music. The small group represented on the present recording contains two names that are likely to be well known on this side of the Atlantic: violinist Pavlo Beznosiuk and cellist Richard Tunnicliffe. Twenty-five years ago, of course, Beznosiuk was one of the young lions of the period-instrument movement in Britain; now he's one of its grand old men. Compared with other firebrand violinists who seem to get greater press coverage, Andrew Manze and Reinhard Goebel among them, I find Beznosiuk's playing to be just as imaginative but without the self-aggrandizement – in other words, his playing is always at the service of the music. His colleagues are equally fine, especially harpsichordist Robert Howarth, who breezes through the plethora of notes in the harpsichord sonatas as if they were proverbial pieces of cake. The sound of the ensemble, especially in the string-dominated trio sonatas, is surprisingly robust and gutsy – you won't hear any whining period violins on these CDs. Incidentally, the organ is used as a continuo keyboard in every movement of every trio sonata – I could have used more variety here, Why are early-music groups so averse to using the lute (therobo)? The combination of a lute with a

chamber organ together with cello or gamba, is both historically correct and musically felicitous.

An exhaustive search through roughly two decade's worth of Fanfare's back issue – as well as all the Schwann catalogs I could lay my hands on – produced exactly one prior recording of Avison's chamber music: a single sonata that London Baroque recorded sometime in the 1980s for Amon Ra, now withdrawn. The present two-CD set would appear to be a first for most of these works, and it's complete, no less. Extensive notes on the composer, the music, the performers, and the instruments are provided. The recorded sound is just about ideal, with a very realistic recorded perspective, and – as indicated above – quite listenable string sound. Highly recommended.

MUSICWEB

Johan van Veen

After many years of long neglect the oeuvre of Charles Avison has recently been explored extensively. As a result the largest part of his output is now available on disc. The Avison Ensemble has played an important part in its rediscovery.

A look at the website of the ensemble (<http://www.avisonensemble.com>) reveals that his complete concertos have been recorded. With this disc two of his collections of chamber music are made available. That leaves two other collections of six sonatas each, the opp. 5 and 7, which contain sonatas in the same scoring as the op. 8 on this set. In addition there is some vocal music, including English adaptations of the 50 Psalms on Italian texts by Benedetto Marcello. As these psalm settings are very expressive I am curious to know how they sound in Avison's arrangements. It is to be hoped that we will get to hear them at some time.

So what about the chamber music which is the subject of this production? The two sets of sonatas are very different in character. The op. 1 follows the model of the sonata da chiesa as it was standardized by Arcangelo Corelli. Each is in four movements: slow - fast - slow - fast. They are well written and show a lot of variety. What makes them especially noteworthy is the amount of expression to be heard in particular through harmonic means.

The first sonata begins with a very short and dark adagio, which - after a general pause - is followed by an andante. The difference is not as clear as one would wish, since the andante is a bit too slow. The opening andante of the Sonata No. 2 is an example of a movement with a lot of harmonic tension. In this sonata it is also remarkable that the second movement - an allegro - merges into the next without a break.

The adagio of the Sonata No. 3 contains some dissonances, and is followed by a sparkling allegro with echo effects. The second movement of the Sonata No. 4, in

which there is frequent imitation between the violins, is quite dramatic. Another dark-coloured adagio opens the Sonata No. 5, whereas the second adagio is full of harmonic tension. The closing allegro is dominated by little dynamic accents.

This is a captivating collection of sonatas, which is given outstanding and expressive performances. The ensemble is excellent, and the balance between the instruments is just right. Two things which seem to belong to the modern fashion in the performance of baroque music are happily absent here. There is no continuous shift from harpsichord to organ and vice versa in the basso continuo, and there is no lute or theorbo in sight.

With the op. 8 set we move to another world. These sonatas are modelled after the Pièces de clavecin en concert by Jean-Philippe Rameau. The strings just emphasize and give colour to lines of the keyboard part, but offer no original material. Accordingly these sonatas can also be played on keyboard alone. In light of this I think the balance is a little less than ideal. I would have liked less presence from the strings. At some points they are just a shade obtrusive.

These are nice pieces but not at the same level as those of Rameau. They lack the wit and playfulness to be found in the latter's Pièces. That said there is much to enjoy, even though the character of the various sonatas isn't always done fullest justice. The first movement of the Sonata No. 1 has the character indication 'andante cantabile', but it doesn't sound very cantabile to me. It is rather ponderous, mostly due to the heavy accents in the keyboard part. This is much more appropriate in the first movement of the Sonata No. 3, called 'marcia andante'.

The Sonata No. 2 is quite playful, but in the second allegro it comes much more to the fore than in the opening allegro, which is a bit too slow. The most sparkling movement of this set is the presto from the Sonata No. 4 which is given a fine performance in an appropriate tempo. The last piece is a set of variations, a habit which was not uncommon at the time. Corelli, for instance, closed his op. 5 - sonatas for violin and bc - with a set of variations on La Folia . The theme of the variations is very nice, and Avison has written beautiful variations on this subject. The ending is quite surprising, but I am not sure to what extent this was required by Avison or a dash of artistic freedom from the performers. Don't worry, it is all within the rules as far as I can tell.

Slight critical remarks aside this is an enjoyable set with music which varies from expressive to entertaining. The Avison Ensemble is once again an eloquent advocate of the oeuvre of this master of the English baroque.

ALLMUSIC
James Manheim

The music of Newcastle-based composer Charles Avison is becoming more frequently recorded. His Italian-style trio sonatas, here designated Six Sonatas for two violins and a bass, Op. 1, were written under the influence of Avison's teacher Geminiani and thus come down in a line directly from Corelli. Each is in four movements, with a good deal of the sober tone of the Italian "church sonata" present especially in the unusual Sonata No. 1, "in chromatic Dorian mode."

Few other Baroque works made use, at least explicitly, of the medieval and Renaissance modes, and the work is characteristic of a certain fantastic aspect in Avison's music that's very nicely captured here by a group of British early music veterans styling themselves the Avison Ensemble. Ornamentation by violinists Pavlo Beznosiuk and Caroline Balding is frequent, with a bit of an explosive quality. Things get even more unusual with the second set of works on this two-disc release, the Six Sonatas for harpsichord, with accompaniment of two violins and cello, Op. 8, first published in the late 1750s. These are neither inverted trio sonatas nor precursors to the Classical piano quartet but rather harpsichord works modeled on those of the French school, specifically Rameau, which might be accompanied by one or more stringed instruments. The harpsichord has the dominant role, with the strings providing simple harmonic support. The sonatas have from one to three movements (mostly there are two), with an intriguing lyricism combining with the French formality. They don't sound like any other chamber music of the period, and they're a nice find.

The sound environment of the album is unique. The players state their explicit aim of re-creating the sound the music would have had in its own day; they use original instruments and work in a late eighteenth century English house that gives the music a spacious, live quality, somehow unlike that of a church. Sample it, and you may want to try the whole release simply on this basis alone. A compelling, slightly weird late-Baroque release.

MUSIC AND VISION

Robert Anderson

It is difficult to approach Newcastle across the Tyne without being enchanted by the soaring corona that dominates the Cathedral. It is difficult to approach Newcastle across the Tyne without being enchanted by the soaring corona that dominates the Cathedral of St Nicholas. Not yet the seat of a bishop in Avison's day, it was the town's largest church, where as organist he spent much of his working life. He had studied in London under Geminiani, who was in turn a pupil of Corelli. Avison was familiar not only with Italian music; he took in his stride also the latest products of Rameau and C P E Bach, both of whom he judged superior to Handel.

The six Op. 1 trio sonatas are constructed on Corelli's model, and all but one are in either Dorian or minor mode. Intended for use in church, they postulate an organ as continuo instrument. Robert Howarth here makes use of a small modern chest

organ, which blends beautifully with the strings. The sonata movements sometimes display a chromatic daring that suggests a composer of real originality and power. Equally striking is the warm expressiveness of the Andante that starts sonata No 2.

If Op 1 was dedicated with due decorum to a local member of parliament who was also an Avison patron, the very different Op. 8 works are essentially harpsichord concertos written for a gifted pupil. She was Mary Eleanor Bowes, heiress to coal estates, who was to become Countess of Strathmore and Kinghorne. Avison considered that her spirited playing as harpsichordist and interest in the finest composers would conduct her 'to a perfect Execution, and true Taste in this Art'. Avison certainly set her many a technical conundrum in the six sonatas.

Robert Howarth is here the brilliant protagonist on a modern Parisian copy of a Taskin original. He possesses all Miss Bowes's musical virtues and probably more; but the engineers have not played him fair. The admirable strings of the Avison Ensemble are given too much prominence throughout, so that the keyboard part is sometimes only a shadow of itself. More's the pity, as the extrovert music demonstrates a very different side of this composer. The March, not so named, that starts Sonata No 4 has a eupeptic sense of well-being to bowl any regiment towards the front. And the finale of No 5 is energetically fugal without any reminder of church.