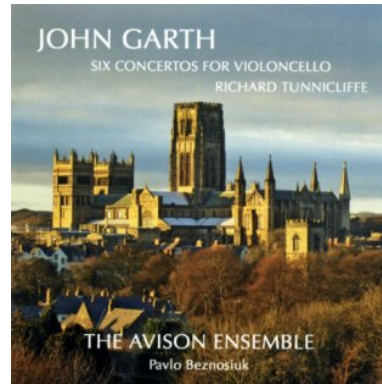


Avison

ENSEMBLE

reviews

JOHN GARTH SIX CELLO CONCERTOS



THE AVISON ENSEMBLE
PAVLO BEZNOSIUK (DIRECTOR & VIOLIN), RICHARD
TUNNICLIFFE (CELLO)
2 CDs on Divine Arts, dda 25059

... memorable music, persuasively performed
... Richard Tunnicliffe irresistibly mixing grace
and virtuosity
... among the most rewarding releases of the year

INTERNATIONAL RECORD REVIEW

Simon Heighes

I have a particular fondness for English music of the eighteenth century, having spent a number of years researching the period for a post-grad thesis. That was way back in the mid-1980s when all there was to listen to on record was a little bit of Arne and Boyce but precious little else until Peter Holman and Hyperion began their pioneering English Orpheus series in 1988. Now hardly a year goes by without the release of a clutch of significant world première recordings. This year, for instance, Capriccio Basel has devoted an entire recording to the glorious concertos of the Oxford-based composer William Hayes. Last year it was the turn of the Newcastle composer Charles Avison, whose Concerti Grossi, opp. 3 and 4 joined the outstanding op. 6 already available on Naxos. The champions of the last two recording projects were the aptly named Avison Ensemble, set up specifically to restore Avison's reputation and bring us some first-rate alternatives to the ubiquitous op. 6 of Corelli and Handel.

Now the Avison Ensemble have begun to look further afield, though their loyalties are still firmly fixed on the North of England. A few years ago they successfully recorded a single cello concerto from the Durham –based John Garth's op.1; now they've returned to finish the job. John Garth (1721-1810) was a fairly typical jobbing musician of the period; performing (on the cello and organ), composing,

teaching and organising concerts. Garth's Six Concertos, op. 1 were all written as a vehicle for him to demonstrate his abilities as a cellist at his regular subscription concerts. Though the collection wasn't published until 1760, the works had all been tried and tested in public since the early 1750s. Concertos for solo instruments (other than the keyboard) were rare in England at this time; composers generally thought their concerti grossi would be more generally useful to England's numerous amateur music societies.

We should be grateful indeed that Garth's op. 1 achieved the security of print and that it was much more than a vanity publication. Each concerto has been lovingly crafted by the expert fingers of an experienced cellist who knew exactly how to showcase the various registers of the instrument (especially the soulful tenor range), and – most importantly of all for a concerto – how to set the teeth rattling with virtuoso flights of fancy. Garth was also a natural melodist with a real gift for pithy memorable ideas and a penchant for tenderising the listener with melting episodes in the minor mode (in no. 4 the penultimate section of the slow movement really brings out the goose bumps). As with so much English music of this period there are a myriad of stylistic influences: it's a veritable tug of war between treasured (Baroque) traditions and (especially in no. 5) new galant turns of phrases.

After such a build-up that heavens the performers here cherish absolutely every note of the music. I could really hug Richard Tunnicliffe for his determination to send these works back out into the world after so many years with the best possible chance of survival. He digs so deep that even the slenderest of Garth's ideas polish up like the work of a master. Violinist Pavlo Beznosiuk directs the one-to-a-part string orchestra with missionary zeal: thrusting, dynamic and witty in the fast movements; lustrous and soulful in slow ones. The wonderful clarity of the recording favours – of all things – the double bass; and Timothy Amherst's playing is beautifully weighted, by turns nimble and groundingly sonorous.

This is a very fine achievement. Memorable music, persuasively performed, richly recorded and among the most rewarding releases of the year.

FANFARE (USA)

Michael Carter

This disc has been inducted into the Fanfare Classical Hall of Fame. While London was the hub of English musical life in the 18th century, there were other cities in which musical societies sprang up and flourished. These included Newcastle upon Tyne, Bath, and Durham. Durham was a convenient way station for travelers and many would lodge in the inns there. One of these, The Red Lion, became a focal point for meetings as well as musical get-togethers. In fact, it would not be incorrect to say that it was Durham's equivalent to Zimmermann's Kaffehaus in Leipzig where Bach and his Collegium Musicum would convene for their evenings.

The heart of musical Durham was the Norman cathedral situated above the city. Many of the city's resident musicians were members of the choir – lay clerks, as our friends on the other side of the pond call them – lured there from around the Scepter'd Isle by the high wages available. Together with the homegrown talent, they participated in the numerous concerts that were regularly presided over by the cathedral organist, and other programs as well.

John Garth (1721-1810) had ties to neither cathedral nor city, but he still exercised a strong influence on Durham's musical life. Little is known of Garth's musical training, but he may have numbered among the early students of Charles Avison, the well-known organist and composer from Newcastle. Garth's first known musical appointment was to the post of organist at St. Edmund's Church, Sedgfield. He was apparently an organist of significant talent and frequently offered organ recitals across northeast England. Garth was later appointed organist at Auckland Castle, traditionally the residence of the Bishop of Durham, holding the post until 1793. Garth's name first appears in a Durham advertisement from 1746. As the years went by, he took responsibility for the management of the subscription concerts in several venues in and around the city.

Garth left behind an impressive body of music, including several sets of keyboard sonatas (opp.2, and 4-7) that follow the blueprint established by Avison: two violins, cello, and either harpsichord or chamber organ. The first set appeared in at least six editions, but the others never proved to be as popular. Garth's cello concertos – though written for his own use – were dedicated to Edward, Duke of York, a cellist of considerable ability. The two men met in 1761 when Garth and Avison – along with William Herschel – were part of the ensemble hired to entertain the Duke during his stay with the Milbanke family. At the time, there was a surfeit of substantial cello music and until then nothing akin to Garth's concertos had been published in Great Britain. The Newcastle Journal reported on a concert in June of 1753 where Garth played one of the concertos: “We hear from Durham that . . . several fine Pieces of Musick were performed, particularly a Violincello Concerto composed and executed by Mr. Garth, which was justly admired and applauded by all present.”

Garth was following the winds of change with these concertos. They walk away from the old school style of Corelli and Geminiani tenaciously clung to by many of England's indigenous composers and move toward the more attractive and accessible idiom of the London-based J. C. Bach. All of the concertos follow the slow-fast-slow pattern of the Italian sonata da camera and follow Corelli's plan of alternating solo and tutti sections. However, Garth was probably more influenced by the “Prussian” sonatas (1742) of C.P.E. Bach, since they make use of a form that Garth employs in both his themes and modulations.

Garth's maturation is traceable from the first through the last of these concertos; the First is more heavily influenced by the Baroque while the Fifth Concerto is more up-to-date. This indicates that these concertos were probably composed over a long period of time. The outer movements tend to follow Avison's thoughts on

melody and harmony, while the middle movements – though shorter than their bookends – generally place the spotlight on the cellist, with gentle and occasional punctuation by the orchestra.

I first made the acquaintance of John Garth's music in the days of vinyl, when the first of these concertos was included on a Hyperion release entitled "The Concerto in Europe." Ever since, I had been hoping for either a complete set of his cello concertos or at least something else from Garth's quill. It was a long time in coming, but the genie granted my wish by way of this double-disc slim pack from Divine Art. This is wonderful music, possessed of flair, style, and occasional significant breadth. The Sixth Concerto is the most expansive, having at its center a gorgeous Siciliana that would even make an Italian composer green with envy, and the unsettled mood of the opening movement of the Fifth Concerto is certainly among the best written in England at the time.

The performances are equally commendable. Richard Tunnicliffe is in complete control of his instrument (c. 1730), which is attributed to Leonhard Manisell of Nuremberg. Tunnicliffe's tone is rich and deep across the range of his cello, never thinning or becoming anemic, and his technique is more than up to the demands required by Garth. The Avison Ensemble is small – no doubt to some degree in keeping with the forces available to Garth – but there is no lack of tonal strength here. They also play with generous helpings of solid musicianship, not to mention complete dedication. The tempos are comfortable, never rushed or lugubrious, and the sound is quite vivid, no doubt due to the acoustic properties of the venue, The Picture Gallery, Paxton House, Berwick upon Tweed.

This is a must-have for cellists, Anglophiles, and all who cherish music of the era; it is also the latest inductee into our Classical Hall of Fame.

EARLY MUSIC NEWS

Richard Maunder

John Garth (1721-1810), organist, virtuoso cellist and concert promoter, published these concertos in 1760 but had evidently played one in Durham as early as 1753. The music is attractive, inventive and skilfully crafted, in an up-to-date 'pre-classical' idiom — which might seem surprising for English concertos written in the decade before J. C. Bach's arrival in London. But we are coming to recognize that England wasn't stuck in a Handelian time-warp in the 1750s: the new style had been pioneered by Giuseppe Sammartini (who died in London in 1750), and published concertos by such composers as Johann Stamitz and C. P. E. Bach were widely available. Garth's concertos will bear comparison with anything of the time from Mannheim or Vienna, and are a real gift to cellists. They should be much better known. The concertos are beautifully played by Richard Tunnicliffe, very stylishly accompanied by a one-to-a-part group — for which three cheers! — who make as full a sound in the tuttis as many a bigger ensemble. It just shows that you don't need anachronistically large forces to do justice to music of this kind. More

cheers for Tunnicliffe's excellent cadenzas and some tasteful ornamentation on the repeats. I strongly recommend these highly enjoyable discs.

THE CONSORT

Tatty Theo

John Garth (1721-1810) was a Durham cellist, who possibly studied with Charles Avison, the Newcastle composer from the Avison Ensemble takes its name. The detailed CD booklet notes by Simon Fleming provide a wealth of interesting and detailed background information about Garth, Avison and music in the region in the 18 th century. Garth was a prolific composer who wrote various types of music. Although his most popular and enduring works were composed for cello. The set of concertos known as Opus 1 were published in 1760, although they had been in the public domain for several years before that, through various performances in the northeast of England.

Contemporary newspaper reports mention that Garth followed the pattern of many 18 th -century composers and dedicated the works to a member of the royal family. In the second half of the 18 th century, the cello was the most popular stringed instrument, and royalty played no small part in this.. Since Handel's time, members of the royal family such as Frederick, Prince of Wales (1707-1751) and George IV (1762-1830) had played the cello, and this, of course, had increased its popularity and made it a much sought after instrument. The extensive dissemination of music and instruments, both through the widespread printing of music and through instruments brought back as 'souvenirs' by noblemen on the Grand Tour, had made England particularly receptive to music for this wonderfully rich instrument. Great English instrument makers such as Benjamin Banks, Joseph Hill, Thomas Dodd, Peter Wamsley and William Forster came into prominence during the second half of the 18 th century.

Garth's set of Cello Concertos, op. 1 are dedicated to the Duke of York, who in 1760 was Edward, a keen amateur cellist, allegedly of some talent. Each of the six concertos follows the same 3-movement pattern (fast-slow-fast), sometimes incorporating a popular dance movement such as a Gigue, Siciliana or Minuet. Five of the six concertos are in a major key and all have an elegant gallant feel to them, appropriate to these transitional times, at the end of the high baroque period and foreshadowing the early classical style.

Garth composed these pieces to play himself and, as these concertos show, he was undoubtedly a gifted cellist. Little is known of his cellistic training, such as whom he studied with, or what instrument he played. He is likely to have played an English instrument. One wonders whether he travelled at all, and whether he ever visited London. Would he, for example, have known of the great Italian émigré cellist, Giovanni Basevi Cervetto (1680-1783) who was a vital force in London's musical life, or was Garth working in a musical vacuum, in terms of cellists? I suspect the latter, especially since Garth's compositions date from a time when

most of the great late 18 th century English cellists and composers (such as John Crosdill and James Cervetto) were only babies.

At this time there were no other cello concertos written by English composers, so far as I am aware. Those by Joseph Reinagle and Robert Lindley, for example, were written much later. It seems that the only cello concerto written by a composer living in England and roughly contemporary with Garth's set of concertos is one by Carl Friedrich Abel, composer at some point before 1759. Although Abel was latterly associated with English music, he didn't settle in England until 1759 so his concerto cannot be counted as English, and certainly it would not have been known by Garth.

All of this points to Garth being the first English composer of cello concertos, the first in a line which culminated in a flurry of works written on the 20 th century, the most famous being that of Elgar. However, at the time when Garth was composing his cello concertos, this was a form that was certainly popular on the continent, with numerous examples in the high baroque and early classical eras written by such composers as Vivaldi, Boccherini, Lanzetti, Duport, Bréval, CPE Bach, Monn, Wagenseil, Anton Kraft and, of course, Haydn. The important question seems to be whether or not Garth would have been aware of any of these works.

The Avison Ensemble's recording is nicely balanced, and Tunnicliffe's cello blends harmoniously with the small instrumental forces of the ensemble. One point of interest is the string forces that the ensemble uses in this recording. The title page of the Concerti Op. 1 clearly states 'Six concertos for the Violoncello with Four Violins One Alto Viola and Basso Ripieno '. However, in the listing of performers on the recording, only two violinists are named. I would have been interested to learn what influenced this decision, yet no mention of it is made in the CD booklet. Was it for matters of musical taste and finesse, or purely for financial economy? I do not, however, find the strings underpowered, so perhaps it was the right decision to make, despite Garth's specification.

Garth's concertos are lengthier than those of his high baroque contemporaries such as Vivaldi, moving towards the more substantial examples of the genre from the classical era so typified by Haydn. In some ways, Garth's concertos compare favourably with the wonderful cello concerto by Monn which was composed before 1750, and which was also many years ahead of its time.

For the most part, Garth's concertos offer few surprises, although there are little gems such as the third movement of the second concerto, with its wonderful pizzicato theme. In all six concertos, the solo cello's theme is normally introduced by an orchestral ritornello. Garth then develops and builds upon it, leading eventually to a cadenza at the end of each movement. Whether Garth's cadenzas exist is not made clear; those on the recording are by Richard Tunnicliffe. It seems likely that Garth would have extemporised at these points, but that his improvisations were either not written down or have not survived. Tunnicliffe's are suitably in character for the pieces, and are executed with virtuosity.

Some concertos have more energy and vibrancy than others, no doubt due in part to the key chosen. The first movement of the fourth concerto has a fine sense of urgency and determination, although this is the one concerto that Garth chooses to end gently, with a Minuet, a common musical device in the earlier part of the 18th century. Handel chose to end several of his Trio Sonatas Op. 5 in this way, winding down gently rather than going out with a bang.

There are echoes of Garth's English predecessors and contemporaries in these pieces, as one might expect: no doubt Handel, Boyce and Avison influenced Garth's musical development. The slow movement of Concerto no. 5 in D minor contains a direct quotation from one of Handel's Concerti Grossi in F major, which seems somewhat abrupt and out of place, especially after the slow D minor opening, with its echoes of Venetian harmony. Garth then beautifully extemporises on the Handelian theme, although all too briefly.

As a fellow cellist, I heartily thank Richard Tunnicliffe and the Avison Ensemble for bringing these works back to the English public. They very much demand to be heard and to be included in the cellist's repertoire again.

MUSICWEB (1)

Jonathan Woolf

Garth was a Durham man and an active proponent of music in his county. He was also an able cellist who published his own set of Six Concertos in 1760 though they were certainly written before that; he'd performed an unidentified concerto as early as 1753. They're all written in a conventional three-movement form, with a ritornello structure, and show the strong influence of C.P.E. Bach and maybe even of Haydn in places; there are also debts to his English contemporary Avison. Appropriately the performers here are members of The Avison Ensemble.

An adept composer, he had an especially fine ear for lyric slow movements, which he vests with considerable gravity and breadth of utterance. The D major is a case in point and is followed by a buoyant and extrovert Gigue. The Affetuososo central movement of the B flat major (No.2 – as No.4 is also in the same key) has a strongly dignified profile that embraces almost Italianate lyricism in places. The finale of this concerto is by contrast witty, athletic and sports an energetic pizzicati episode full of incident and ear catching turns of phrase. The Andante of the A major has both elegance and gravity in the C.P.E. Bach mould.

The orchestration throughout is sound, unimpeachable, and the small ensemble forces – two violins, viola, cello, bass, and harpsichord – offer Richard Tunnicliffe sterling support. This is especially true in the rather advanced opening movement of the Fifth Concerto in D minor, which seems to me the most forward looking of all the concerti, and a thoroughly distinguished composition. As for the single most beautiful movement perhaps one could suggest the Siciliana of the last concerto in G major for its melancholy beauty clothed in the gentlest beauty.

The recording was made in The Picture Gallery, Paxton House, Berwick upon Tweed and it sounds highly sympathetic and attractive. Tunnicliffe bears the soloistic responsibilities lightly. His accomplishment is to characterise these concertos with individuality, to bring them to life with a strong sense of their character but without exaggerating their relatively modest span. He also manages to do so with real flair and technical surety.

MUSICWEB (2)

John Sheppard

John Garth was born at Witton le Wear in County Durham, and for many years lived in Durham, organizing public concerts there. This set of Concertos was dedicated to the Duke of York, a cellist of considerable ability, and was followed by sets of sonatas for strings and keyboard and of organ voluntaries. The composer had needed suitable music to demonstrate his own prowess on the cello, as at that time no such pieces had been published in Britain. He first played one of them in 1753 in the Assembly Rooms in Durham, the others following over the next few years. All are in three movements and according to the booklet this is their first recording. Although Gerald Finzi edited No. 2 nearly sixty years ago, the remainder have not been available, as far as I know, since their original publication. They are recorded here in an edition by Gordon Dixon with cadenzas by Richard Tunnicliffe. One oddity is that the title page to the original publication, reproduced in the booklet, refers to them as being for "four violins, one alto viola and basso ripieno", but the orchestra here has only two violins. Possibly the original issue of two copies of each of the violin parts was simply a relic of the time of the Concerto Grosso, but it would have been interesting to have had the performers' views on why they did not employ two more violinists - other than the obvious financial considerations.

The lengthy and helpful booklet notes explain the likely origin of the forms used in these works, deriving in part from Avison, his fellow North-Eastern composer, together with the more modern gallant style coming into fashion. C.P.E. Bach may well have been the main influence in terms of their overall form. The general cut of the themes is very typical of the period, but Garth does show considerable powers of invention, avoiding cliché and turning corners with grace and wit. The slow movements are particularly attractive, especially that of No. 2 which may perhaps have been the reason that led Finzi into editing it. The performances are excellent, with Richard Tunnicliffe irresistibly mixing grace and virtuosity. The recording is clear without sounding clinical or fierce. Maybe these discs do not fill a major gap in the range of recorded music, but in performances such as these the present Concertos give immense pleasure.