

reviews

HANDEL: Concerti Grossi Opus 6 The Avison Ensemble

Pavlo Beznosiuk, director & violin

3 CDs on Linn Records, CKD 362

- Awarded an *Opus d'Or* Award 2010
- Ring of *ClassiqueInfo*
- Awarded Best Recording 2010 by *High Fidelity Magazine*
- Nominated for the 2011 International Classical Music Awards
- Released on Linn Records - *Gramophone Magazine* Label of the Year 2010



... a sense of occasion and musical opulence
... achingly beautiful and pulsating with
energy and life
... the ensemble playing is simply electrifying

Opus d'Or

Jean-Jacques Millo

19 August 2010

The Concerti Grossi Opus 6 by Handel are the "natural" descendants of a pallet of famous composers, "from the glorious tradition of a Torelli and above all a Corelli, whose Concerti Grossi Opus 6 were first published in Amsterdam in 1714, even if they were first played in Rome in 1682," explains Marc Vignal, who adds: "In England, the Opus 2 by Albinoni first appeared in 1709, the Opus 3 by Vivaldi no doubt in 1714, the Opus 6 by Corelli in 1715, and the Opus 3 by Geminiani towards 1732. It was perhaps John Walsh himself, who became the Haendel's principal publisher, who asked him to become of member of this distinguished lineage." The Avison Ensemble, under the direction of Pavlo Beznosiuk, here offers us no less than a small musical miracle. Indeed, with exemplary cohesion, each and every musician gives his best, and clarity dominates the ensemble with radiance rarely heard. Everything seems to be weightless, ethereal even, all for our pleasure. Here is a landmark SACD, sumptuously recorded, that one should not hesitate to acquire.

Gramophone Magazine

David Vickers

1 February 2011

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Handel's inventive Twelve Grand Concertos (written in 1739) contain an amazing variety of compositional techniques, notwithstanding their strict orchestral parameters of only strings and continuo. Known as Op. 6 since its second edition published in 1741, a good acquaintance with these concerti grossi is vital for anyone wishing to obtain a comprehensive appreciation of Handel's genius - and there are a lot of excellent dissimilar versions to savour. The Newcastle-based Avison Ensemble, under the experienced direction of violinist Pavlo Beznosiuk, ranks alongside the best for musicianship, taste and style. Simon Fleming's booklet-note is a friendly introduction for the novice, although some "facts" might raise a few eyebrows (such as the reiteration of the cloying myth that "the success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728...sounded the death bell for sung dramatic works in Italian").

The Avison Ensemble is constituted on a smaller scale than Handel's orchestra would have been, especially in its lower instruments; also there are no bassoons or lute in the continuo group, and only one harpsichord instead of Handel's usual two. This is no different to other "historically informed" recordings of Op. 6, and need not be considered an obstacle for enjoyment, even if I hope that one day a modern-Baroque orchestra will strive for the exact sonorities Handel would have envisaged. The optional oboe parts provided by Handel for a few of the concertos are omitted reasonably here.

Beznosiuk is an excellent judge of textures and tempi, and his leadership of the concertino group (also including fellow fiddler Caroline Balding and cellist Richard Tunnicliffe) is authoritative and nuanced. Softly balanced cadences throughout the set are highly effective, and in fast music the interplay between concertino and ripienists is impeccable. Details that I had barely noticed hitherto during the gentle *Andante larghetto* of No. 2 hint at French ballet music, and the pastoral drone and shepherd-pipe fiddles in the *Polonaise* of No. 3 are performed with charming intimacy. The *Musette* in No. 6 has elegance in the soft French dance sections that feature lovely hushed tutti, and unforced agility in the animated middle section. The gutsier forthright music is played crisply and sweetly: the declamatory opening *Larghetto e staccato* of No. 5 leads into its ensuing *Allegro* in a more measured fashion than some zippier and brasher interpretations, but Beznosiuk maximises the clarity of small gestures in the music, and such extensive care reaps its own kind of rewards.

The music-making rarely veers towards becoming precious: phrases in the opening *Largo* of No. 7 persistently taper off and diminish the lyrical pull of Handel's writing, and, in the same concerto, the exclusion of harpsichord in favour of a barely audible organ seems odd considering the trouble Handel took over supplying detailed figured bass; the reduced vivacity also stifles the wittiness of the concluding *Hornpipe* (admittedly the organ continuo works much better in the broody opening *Largo* of No. 9). The concluding *Gigue* of No. 9 is controlled and deliberate, where one might have hoped for swagger and panache. However, in the Tenth Concerto, the introspective melancholy of the *Lento* and the sudden mood-swings of the penultimate *Allegro* are impressive. No. 11 has exuberance in its opening (*Andante larghetto, e staccato*), and its finale is thrillingly fleet-footed. I suspect that the Avison

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Ensemble's set shall remain rewarding long after the novelties of more precocious approaches have faded.

BBC Music Magazine

George Pratt

4 August 2010

Handel wrote these 12 concertos in a single month in the autumn of 1739. While he pays homage to others - Domenico Scarlatti, Georg Muffat - in borrowings, and re-cycles some of his own music, these 62 movements represent an astonishing burst of compositional creativity. They're exceptionally varied: from four to six movements, including French overtures, Italian ritornellos, dances, fugues, variations, Textures range from strings without soloists to an independent trio dialogue with the orchestra. Yet they're unified by their outstanding quality; there's not a duff movement in the whole set and some - the haunting Musette of No. 6, the monotone accelerating fugue-subject of No. 8, the teasing iambic rhythms of No. 9's larghetto - are unforgettable.

This fine ensemble, founded to investigate the previously unknown music of the Newcastle composer Charles Avison, takes on his London contemporary with tremendous panache. The three soloists are first-rate. In the later works, notable No. 11, Handel included movements which are virtually solo concertos; Pavlo Beznosiuk's virtuosity had me on the edge of my seat in the andante variations and the final allegro. But the Ensemble plays, too, with great tenderness, for instance No. 8's brief but lovely quote from the aria 'Piangero' in Giulio Cesare.

Although Handel's optional oboes for four concertos are omitted (Collegium Musicum 90 on Chandos includes them), alternating harpsichord and organ continuo lends tonal variety.

The price paid for great energy and close-recorded 'presence' is some hardness in the sound (noticeably tempered in SACD) but, with tone-control tweaked, I shall certainly return frequently to this splendid set.

The Herald

Michael Tumelty

9 August 2010

For 20 years now I've been standing on the sidelines, observing the phenomenal growth of interest in Handel's operas, along with developments in festivals through musicians such as Nicholas McGegan, a cult figure in Handel circles. From those sidelines, the occasional forlorn bleat could be heard: But what about the orchestral music? There has always been the odd recording, but here is a very special, brilliant, three-disc set of the opus 6 Concerti Grossi, which is just bursting with vigour, wit, style, refinement and

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some juicily characterful playing from Pavlo Beznosiuk's superlative Avison Ensemble. The 12 concertos, which were written in a single burst of energy, are multi-movement pieces with many sections running at under two minutes. Fast movements go like the wind, some fleet, others meaty; slow movements are wonderfully expressive in Beznosiuk's hands. I know that the concertos are masterpieces of the species; but here, with the Avisons at strength, they actually sound like true masterpieces. It's another triumph for Linn producer Philip Hobbs.

International Record Review

Andrew O'Connor

26 August 2010

The Avison Ensemble is a period instrument-English orchestra led by the celebrated Baroque violinist Pavlo Beznosiuk. On the new recording, it plays Handel's 'Twelve Grand Concerto's' ([sic] as the publisher Walsh described them in his subscription advertisement) with only strings throughout, ignoring the option of adding two oboes in Concertos Nos. 1, 2, 5 and 6. I think this is a shame, as the winds add a delightful aural tincture. However, as two of the comparison versions do the same thing, it is hardly a reason to overlook this new recording. (I have omitted from the comparisons the recent set by the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra on ABC Classics, reviewed in February 2010, as I am a consultant to that orchestra, but will note that it too opts for the all-string approach.)

The Avison also has the simplest continuo group of the four recordings: two cellos, double bass and harpsichord alone (the last occasionally replaced by an organ, though the booklet omits mention of it). The Academy of Ancient Music adds an archlute, as does Poland's Arte dei Suonatori (under guest conductor Martin Gester), which sometimes alternates with a theorbo and in one concerto an organ replaces the harpsichord. The always effervescent Italian group Il Giardino Armonico uses four cellos, violone and double bass, faggotino (small bassoon), two standard bassoons, archlute, triple harp, archlute two harpsichords and an organ. Uniquely among the recordings under discussion, it also employs two oboes in the four concertos where the choice is given. The Avison Ensemble uses a much smaller string band than the Italians: only eight violins as opposed to 16; but this is the same size as the AAM and slightly larger than the Polish orchestra.

Finally, Linn has given the Avison Ensemble the high-definition hybrid SACD treatment, as did BIS with the Poles. The other two recordings are in CD-only format. Of the four recordings, Linn is easily the clearest and most naturally balanced. It is also attractively produced and presented.

First, in listening to the AAM recording I found it striking how the standard of period string playing by English musicians has improved even since 1997. This is not to say there was anything deficient in the AAM's playing, just that the Avison Ensemble displays an even greater level of confidence and proficiency. Listen to the two groups playing the opening movements of the

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imperious Concerto No. 10 in D minor and the greater crispness and precision of the Avison Ensemble is patent. Revisiting Il Giardino Armonico in the same piece, one is struck by how, for all the excitement, the ensemble playing is much looser and the string tone less clean - and dare I say less authentic - than either English orchestra. The Polish orchestra's attack is much cleaner than the Italians' and, through careful articulation and immaculate recording, brings out the inner voices in this movement perhaps better than all the others. Where the Avison Ensemble really triumphs in this Concerto, and indeed throughout the set, is in conveying a sense of occasion and musical opulence. Beznosiuk's reading may be less overtly dramatic than the other directors', but he more than compensates for this by his use of gesture and a deeper sense of rhetoric. In the magical Siciliana from Concerto No. 8, for example, there is such delicacy and exquisite craftsmanship that it sounds not just beautiful and touching but seems to say something profound about the human heart (as Handel did throughout his operas).

Beznosiuk embellishes much less than the other concertmasters (particularly Enrico Onofri, leader of Il Giardino Armonico); but when he does so, it is masterful. Perhaps he should have done more of it. The Avison Ensemble's principal cellist, Richard Tunnicliffe, and its other solo violinist, presumably Caroline Balding, shine particularly in the concertino parts in Concerto No. 9, Handel's arrangement of his Cuckoo and the Nightingale Organ Concerto. They play with less aggression and more grace than the soloists of Il Giardino Armonico and with more personality than Andrew Manze and his AAM colleagues or Arte dei Suonatori.

I confess to being more of an Op. 3 man when it comes to Handel's Concerti grossi. However, this set has so much character, insight and understated drama that I felt as if immersed in a vast 12-act opera without words. Magnificent!

ClassicsToday.com

David Vernier

14 December 2010

Handel's unrivaled masterpieces of the concerto grosso form and style--his Twelve Grand Concertos, in seven parts, for four violins, a tenor, a violoncello, with a thorough-bass for the harpsichord--here receive their finest recording to date, with performances that leave all others--both period- and modern-instrument versions--in their wake. For obvious reasons these 12 concertos have remained popular since their publication in 1740: the irresistibly congenial tunes and engaging rhythms, the free-spirited fugues, endearing Largos and Adagios, and overall vivacious writing for all instruments elicits correspondingly high-spirited responses from anyone within earshot of these unrelentingly entertaining works.

Pavlo Beznosiuk and his Avison Ensemble have left not a single Handelian note unaccounted for nor a delightful phrase unturned, and the ensemble

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playing is simply electrifying, crackling and sparking with the kind of head-on accents and lilting rhythmic lift that this music requires but rarely enjoys. You don't have to already know this music to appreciate (my favorite) Concerto No. 4 in A minor HWV 322, with its scintillating allegros, or the thrillingly accented opening dialog of Concerto No. 5 HWV 323, or the many beautifully drawn slow-movement melodies and catchy, clever dance movements.

We can cite individual players for their impressive effort, but when virtually everyone is performing at such a high level it doesn't seem appropriate--this is definitely a triumph of ensemble performance, where everyone is a master of the medium and the material, all of which is beautifully realized by the stunningly realistic, resoundingly vibrant sound engineering. By now you've got the picture: Essential!

Classical Music Magazine

Nicholas Anderson

2 September 2010

The Avison Ensemble has for several years been charming our ears with recordings of music by the Newcastle composer from whom it takes its name. Now it turns its attention to one of the greatest of all concerto sets, Handel's Opus 6. The spontaneity, variety and fluency of ideas are endlessly diverting and full of humour, wit and Handelian tenderness. Violinist and director, Pavlo Beznosiuk avoids anything in the nature of exaggerated gesture, preferring to capitalise upon the natural spaciousness and inherent grace of the music. If, on occasion he just fails to realise the sheer exuberance of some competitors then there is generous compensation in the ensemble's intuitive grasp of elegant phrasing and breadth of contour. Handel's expressive language developed through his experience in the theatre, and the range is both extended and vivid in contrast. The Avison Ensemble responds to it with affective warmth and communicative amiability. A satisfying set, pleasingly recorded.

Financial Times

Andrew Clark

4 August 2010

...These concertos are not as frequently heard as they once were. More's the pity, for they contain some of Handel's most mellifluous music, as this recording makes manifest.

...Directed by Pavlo Beznosiuk, the Avison Ensemble proves itself a flexible, high-spirited group, never letting stylistic rigidity get in the way of expression and "soul".

Early Music Review

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Brian Clark
4 August 2010

Their line-up is relatively small: eight violins, two each of violas and cellos, and a single bass. This means that the soloists are not swamped when the tutti join in. Those soloists are, needless to say, first rate - Pavlo Beznosiuk, Caroline Balding and Richard Tunnicliffe... There seems to be a tendency these days just to take a little more time over phrasing. That is not to say that rubato is making a come-back; rather that some tempi are relaxing slightly to allow more expression, without disrupting the flow of the music. I'm puzzled that the three discs don't each have four concertos, but there may be some technical explanation. The Avison Ensemble have made something of a reputation with their eponymous recordings - it's good to know that music-making in Newcastle is spreading its wings. Can we expect Geminiani soon? I, for one, certainly hope so.

Audiophile Audition
John Sunier
2 July 2010

George Frideric Handel composed his two most famous concerti grossi - Op. 3 and Op. 6 - for playing during performances of his oratorios and odes. They were based on the older concerto da chiesa and the chamber concerto style of Corelli rather than the three-movement concerto style favored by Vivaldi. They are mostly new material, and display a wide variety of styles, including trio sonatas, French overtures, Italian sinfonias, airs, arias, fugues, theme and variations, and many different dance forms. These are both considered some of the best examples of the Baroque concerto grosso - right up there with Bach's Brandenburg Concerti as the greatest examples of instrumental works of the High Baroque.

Handel was clearly under the influence of Corelli, because he not only followed his style, writing a dozen concerti all in different keys, but even made them the same opus number Corelli has used. The instrumentation is also the same as Corelli: a concertino of two violins and cello, supported by four-part strings and continuo. Two of the concerti are reworkings of Handel's organ concerti, including the one nicknamed "the Cuckoo and the Nightingale." All have five or six movements, the first of which is usually of a very regal nature.

The Avison Ensemble is based at Newcastle in the UK and is one of the country's foremost exponents of 18th century music played on period instruments. It is named after the 18th century composer Charles Avison who was born in Newcastle. The ensemble is made up of four 1st violins, four 2nd violins, two violas, two celli, a doublebass and harpsichord. The performers are all highly skilled and Linn's multichannel recording does them full justice. There is great clarity of the string tone and the balance with the harpsichord is just right.

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There are two other SACD versions of the Op. 6 concerti but I haven't heard them. If only Richard Egarr's recording with the Academy of Ancient Music were available on SACD there would be quite some competition here, but it was released only on CD, and only his version of Op. 3 is on a Harmonia mundi SACD. Some of the standard CD versions fit Op. 6 onto just two instead of three discs, but in spite of the additional cost of this new SACD set, it gets my vote for a magnificent realization of this important set of works.

MusicWeb International

Brian Wilson

2 July 2010

I downloaded this just as I was about to close this Roundup, so I have had time to hear it all through just once, though I have listened to some of the concertos several times. I am very impressed - this could well become my benchmark in future for this wonderful music, alongside, or even replacing Hogwood (Decca, now Avie), Standage (Chandos) and Pinnock (DG): everything seems so right and appropriate in scale that I'm going to choose it as my last-minute Download of the Month. It may seem odd to single out the continuo, but even that seems to be exactly in proportion - just audible but not obtrusive - and imaginative, with organ (not credited) and a copy of a 1745 harpsichord. The price is right, too, ranging from £13 for mp3 to £25 for the 24-bit Studio Master. Make sure that your player will accept 24/88.2 downloads if you are planning to go for the latter: otherwise, the 'ordinary' CD-quality WMA sounds excellent.

BBC Online

Charlotte Gardner

4 August 2010

"Northern English 18th century concerti and sonatas" sounds like one of the more esoteric specialist subjects on Mastermind. It's actually what the Newcastle-based period band, The Avison Ensemble, has recorded for all nine of their previous discs. This first recording of theirs for Linn Records shows that they're more than capable of making their mark outside the sphere of interesting niche repertoire.

Handel always wrote with an eye to popularity and bank balance, and his Concerti Grossi Opus 6, or "Grand Concertos", were no exception to the rule. Written in 1739, they tapped into the British public's enduring enthusiasm for Arcangelo Corelli's set of 12 concerti grossi. Handel emulated Corelli's scoring, writing for strings, optional oboes, and continuo, with a soloist group of two violins and a cello. He even gave his set the same opus number. However, the emulation stopped there, as the music itself is typical Handel, with its mix of variety, innovation and self-plagiarism. Fugues and dances sit side by side, there's a multitude of different instrumental colours and textures, and he frequently borrows melodies from his other works. In fact, No.9 is

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almost a straight transcription of his earlier organ concerto, "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale".

The Avison Ensemble's interpretation, performed without the optional oboes, is satisfyingly different. It's taken at a statelier pace than some (you'd have a hard job actually gigging to No.9's Gigue), and it's perhaps not as cleanly executed as other recordings. However, in place of the clipped, gossamer-weighted speed of many period performances, you get bags of smoothly delivered warmth and brightness. Added to that, whilst it sounds like a contradiction to then talk about its raw quality (smoothly delivered rawness, come again?), that's exactly what it has, thanks to a nicely controlled but very present element of gung-ho enjoyment. Then, in the way the musical lines swell and subside, and dynamic contrasts are played upon, the Avisons achieve what every composer hopes for their music, namely the ability to move the listener's spirit. Bravo.

Audiophilia.com

13 February 2011

I recall, many years ago, reading a comment by an 18th Century writer (Charles Burney, perhaps?) which extensive Googling has failed to uncover, so I'll have to paraphrase; the gist of it was that if all the music in the world except the "Great Twelve" were lost, then the loss could be borne - but the tragedy of losing the Great Twelve alone would be unimaginable. Such was the esteem in which Handel's contemporaries held his Opus 6 Concerti Grossi ("Grand Concertos"), composed during a single month in 1739. Seen as both a direct tribute to Corelli's earlier Opus 6 set - modelling their then old-fashioned multi-movement structure, scoring for strings only and even using the same opus number - and an attempt to emulate their commercial success with the English public, Handel has unquestionably left us with one of the crowning jewels of the Baroque. I was fortunate that two new recordings came my way within weeks of each other.

The Australian Brandenburg Orchestra's recording is unusual in placing the concerti out of their numbered sequence; an artistically valid approach, given that they were never intended to be performed in that way, which has had the fortuitous (and possibly unique) outcome of allowing the work to be fitted onto two discs instead of the usual three. This also illustrates how performance practice has changed; a 20-year old recording I own (by an obscure East European band) runs some 25 minutes longer! Timings are not universally quick, though, and there is no impression of undue haste. Indeed, more often it is the (UK-based) Avison Ensemble's recording that gives the greater impression of pace and pent-up energy. I feel there is a weight of expectation on any English artist recording Handel - that the music be imbued with an overriding sense of grandeur and nobility - and the ABO clearly feel the greater freedom to take a less literal approach to the written score, including improvising their own cadenzas. What I found most fascinating, then, was the way the Avisons manage to make the music simultaneously noble and

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imposing, yet also achingly beautiful and pulsating with energy and life. The precision of their ensemble playing is breathtaking, their interpretations almost impossibly stylish. The ABO's rendition, as fine as it is, cannot compete with the turbocharged intensity of the Avisons' playing, still less with the fabulous recorded sound of Linn's hybrid SACDs. The quad-width wraparound packaging that Linn use can be a bit of a handful, though its rendering of details from a London-period Canaletto is extremely classy. The 'unique' aesthetic of the Australian recording's artwork I shall allow to pass without comment!

The Avison Ensemble have caused me to hear these familiar works afresh. I had not realised before the extent to which, by incorporating so many influences old and new, Handel created a set of concertos that serve as the ultimate almanac of a century's musical achievement, more effectively than any other work I know. Rarely have I felt so enthusiastic about a new recording - if you buy only one all year, make it this one.